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The Many Voices of Sylvia Plath

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Background

This research project was a study of the early development of the poetic voice of American poet Sylvia Plath, as evidenced by her college journals, poetry, essays for classes, short stories, letters, and other papers, held at Smith College, where she attended in the 1950s. In this research, particular attention was paid to her writing before and after her 1953 suicide attempt, focusing on the contrasting and developing voices used in her writing.

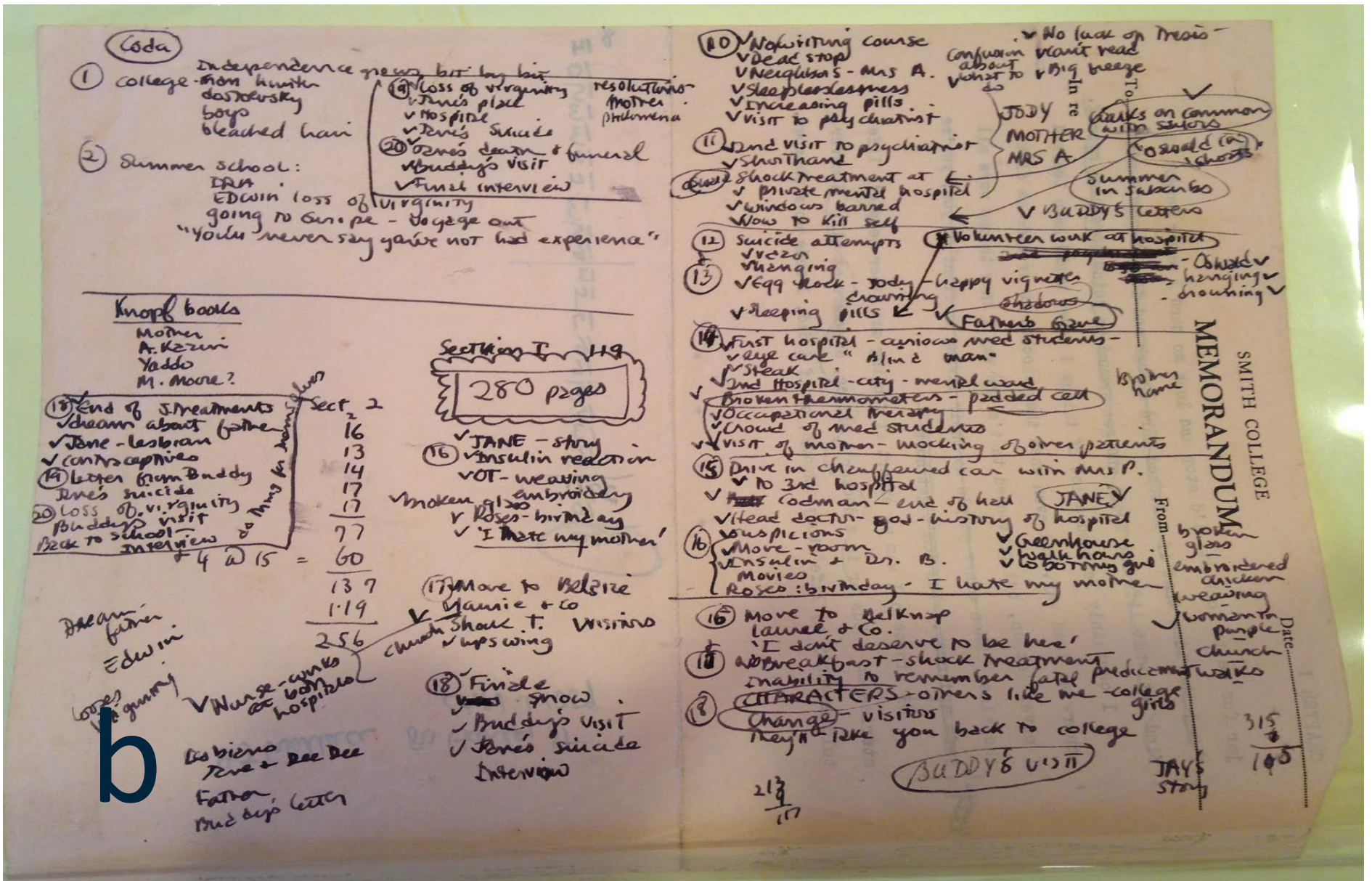


Figure 1a-b – (a) Plath with classmates her freshman year at Smith College (b) Original outline of *The Bell Jar*

“Voices”

The tone Plath used while writing to her mother was drastically different from the “voice” implored in her fiction, poetry, or when writing to friends. Every form of her writing seemed to represent an entirely different side of Plath.

In her journal, perhaps most of all, Plath wrote with the least amount of reserve. She seemed to be writing only to her self, and with very little caution for a woman in the 1950s.

She wrote openly about her sexuality, the injustice she saw between sexes, and the profound anxiety she felt because of the pressure she put on herself (as a writer), as well as socially (she felt that it was required of her to marry and have children).

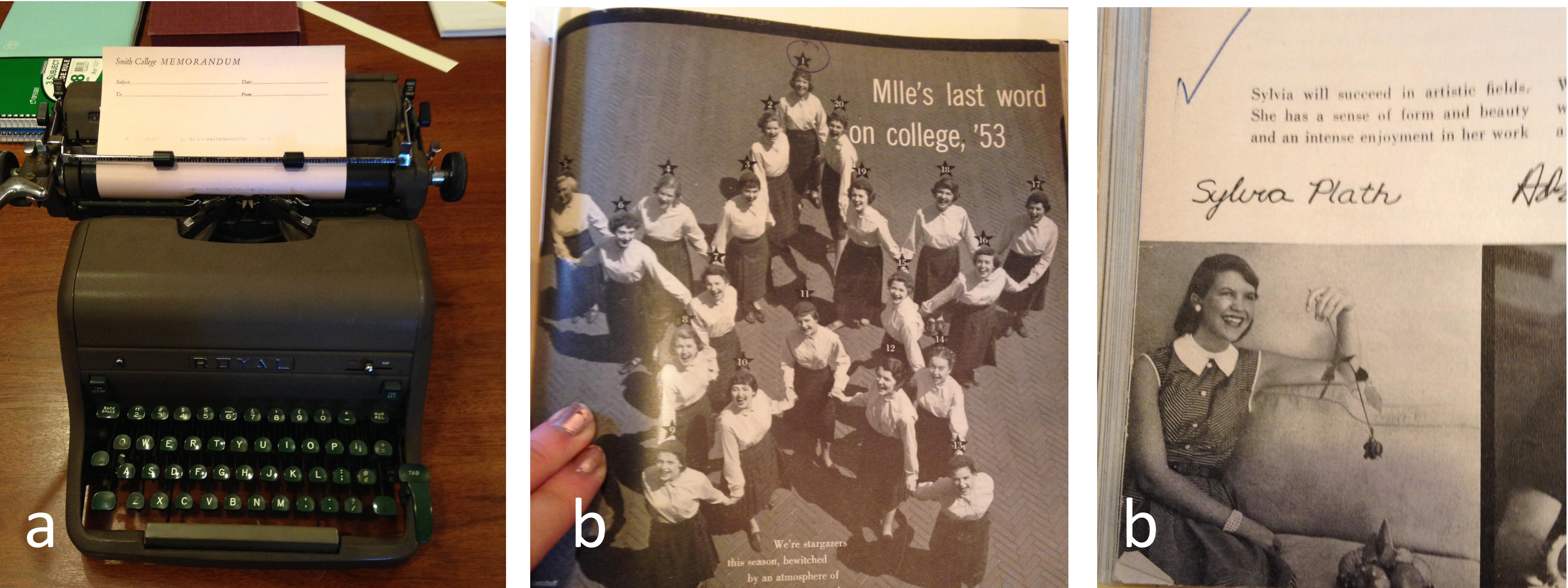
Plath believed that in order to someday have a family, she would ultimately have to give up her writing.

The extreme pressures Plath struggled with during these college years were later reflected in her novel, *The Bell Jar*, and in a completely different “voice” from that of her writing from the time period.

This semi-autobiographical novel was based on the summer of 1953 that she spent in New York, working for Mademoiselle Magazine as a student intern.

Shortly after leaving New York, Plath suffered an intense nervous breakdown, and attempted suicide. The voice she uses for the character Plath based herself on is wry and cynical, and provides a completely new perspective on who Plath was when compared to her writing of the same period.

Figure 2a-b: (a) Plath’s typewriter (b) Plath pictured in Mademoiselle magazine, summer of 1953.



Result: The two essays

Essay One Abstract

My first creative nonfiction essay, “There is Only the Looking” explores Plath’s search for her identity in her journal leading up to her suicide attempt, and the way she later reflects on these events and feelings in *The Bell Jar*. I compare her feelings of searching to my own first year of college.

Essay Two Abstract

My second creative nonfiction essay, “The Words Shift, So Do I” explores the different voices Plath uses in her writing during this time period, and the ways in which her journal was her most genuine, uncensored self. I discuss the power of words, and what personal voice development can potentially mean to the writer and the audience.



Figure 4 – Sylvia Plath’s college journal

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